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WOMAN SUFFRAGE

VIEWS

OF THE

MINORITY OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

FORTY-EIGHTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION

AS SUBMITTED BY

HON. THOMAS B. REED

REPRESENTATIVE FROM MAINE

PRESENTED BY MR. CLAPP

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EXTENDING THE RIGHT OF SUFFRAGE TO WOMEN.

VIEWS OF THE MINORITY OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES ON THE SUBJECT OF WOMAN SUFFRAGE, SUBMITTED BY HON. THOMAS B. REED, OF MAINE, APRIL 24, 1884.

Mr. Thomas B. Reed, of Maine, from the Committee on the Judiciary, submitted the following views of the minority:

No one who listens to the reasons given by the superior class for the continuance of any system of subjection can fail to be impressed with the noble disinterestedness of mankind. When the subjection of persons of African descent was to be maintained, the good of those persons was always the main object. When it was the fashion to beat children, to regard them as little animals who had no rights, it was always for their good that they were treated with severity, and never on account of the bad temper of their parents. Hence, when it is proposed to give to the women of this country an opportunity to present their case to the various State legislatures to demand of the people of the country equality of political rights, it is not surprising to find that the reasons on which the continuance of the inferiority of women is urged are drawn almost entirely from a tender consideration for their own good. The anxiety felt lest they should thereby deteriorate would be an honor to human nature were it not an historical fact that the same sweet solicitude has been put up as a barrier against every progress which women have made ever since civilization began. There is no doubt to-day that if in Turkey or Algiers, countries where women's sphere is most thoroughly confined to the home circle, it was proposed to admit them to social life, to remove the veil from their faces and permit them to converse in open day with the friends of their husbands and brothers, the conservative and judicious Turk or Algerine of the period, if he could be brought to even consider such a horrible proposition, would point out that the sphere of women was to make home happy by those gentle insipidities which education would destroy; that by participation in conversation with men they would learn coarseness, debase their natures, and men would thereby lose that ameliorating influence which still leaves them unfit to associate with women. He would point out that "nature" had determined that women should be secluded; that their sphere was to raise and educate the man child and that any change would be a violation of the divine law which, in the opinion of all conservative men, always ordains the present but never the future.

So in civilized countries when it was proposed that women should own their own property, that they should have the earnings of their own labor, there were not wanting those who were sure that such a proposition could work only evil to women, and that continually. It would destroy the family, discordant interests would provoke dis-

pute, and the only real safety for woman was in the headship of man, not that man wanted superiority for any selfish reason, but to preserve intact the family relation for woman's good. To-day a woman's property belongs to herself; her earnings are her own; she has been emancipated beyond the wildest hopes of any reformer of 25 years ago. Almost every vocation is open to her. She is proving her usefulness in spheres which the "nature" worshiped by the conservative of 25 years ago absolutely forbade her to enter. Notwithstanding all these changes, the family circle remains unbroken, the man child gets as well educated as before, and the ameliorating influence of woman has become only the more marked. Thirty years ago hardly any political assemblage of the people was graced by the presence of women. Had it needed a law to enable them to be present, what an argument could have been made against it. How easily it could have been shown that the coarseness, the dubious expressions, the general vulgarity of the scene, could have had no other effect than to break down that purity of word and thought which women have and which conservative and radical are alike sedulous to preserve. And yet the actual presence of women at political meetings has not debased them, but has raised the other sex. Coarseness has not become diffused through both sexes, but has fled from both. To put the whole matter in a short phrase: The association of the sexes in the family circle, in society, and in business having proved improving to both, there is neither history, reason, nor sense to justify the assertion that association in politics will lower the one or demoralize the other.

Hence we would do better to approach the question without trepidation. We can better leave the "sphere" of woman to the future than confine it in the chains of the past. Words change nothing. Prejudices are none the less prejudices because we vaguely call them "nature" and prate about what nature has forbidden when we only mean that the thing we are opposing has not been hitherto done. "Nature" forbade a steamship to cross the Atlantic the very moment it was crossing, and yet it arrived just the same. What the majority call "nature" has stood in the way of every progress of the past and present and will stand in the way of all future progress. It has also stood in the way of many unwise things. It is only another name for conservatism. With conservatism the minority have no quarrel. It is essential to the stability of mankind, of government, and of social life. To every new proposal it rightfully calls a halt, demanding countersign, whether it be friend or foe. The enfranchisement of women must pass the ordeal like everything else. It must give good reason for its demand to be or take its place among the half-forgotten fantasies which have challenged the support of mankind and have not stood the test of argument and discussion.

The committee claim that suffrage is not a right, but a privilege to be guarded by those who have it, and to be by them doled out to those who shall become worthy. That every extension of suffrage has been granted in some form or other by those already holding it is probably true. In some countries, however, it has been extended upon the simple basis of expediency and in others in obedience to a claim of right. If suffrage be a right, if it be true that no man has a claim to govern any other man except to the extent that the other man has a right to govern him, then there can be no discussion of the

question of woman suffrage. No reason on earth can be given by those who claim suffrage as a right of manhood which does not make it a right of womanhood also. If the suffrage is to be given man to protect him in his life, liberty, and property, the same reasons urge that it be given to woman, for she has the same life, liberty, and property to protect. If it be urged that her interests are so bound up in those of man that they are sure to be protected, the answer is that the same argument was urged as to the merger in the husband of the wife's right of property, and was pronounced by the judgment of mankind fallacious in practice and in principle. If the natures of men and women are so alike that for that reason no harm is done by suppressing women, what harm can be done by elevating them to equality? If the natures be different, what right can there be in refusing representation to those who might take juster views about many social and political questions?

Our Government is founded not on the rule of the wisest and best but upon the rule of all. The ignorant, the learned, the wise and the unwise, the judicious and the unjudicious are all invited to assist in governing, and upon the broad principle that the best government for mankind is not the government which the wisest and best would select, but that which the average of mankind would select. Laws are daily enacted not because they seem the wisest even to those legislators who pass them, but because they represent what the whole people wish. And, in the long run, it may be just as bad to enact laws in advance of public sentiment as to hold on to laws behind it. Upon what principle in a Government like ours can one-half the minds be denied expression at the polls? Is it because they are untrained in public affairs? Are they more so than the slaves were when the right of suffrage was conferred on them? It should also be considered, upon the proposition that to admit women would be temporarily to lower the suffrage on account of their lack of training in public duties, that what is now asked of us is not immediate admission to the right, but the privilege of presenting to the legislatures of the different States the amendment, which can not become effective until adopted by three-fourths of them. It may be said that the agitation and discussion of this question will long before its adoption have made women as familiar with public affairs as the average of men, for the agitation is hardly likely to be successful until after a majority, at least, of women are in favor of it.

We believe in the educating and improving effect of participation in government. We believe that every citizen in the United States is made more intelligent, more learned, and better educated by his participation in politics and political campaigns. It must be remembered that education, like all things else, is relative. While the average American voter may not be all that impatient people desire, and is far behind his own future, yet he is incomparably superior to the average citizen of any other land where the subject does not fully participate in the government. Discussions on the stump and, above all, the discussions he himself has with his fellows, breed a desire for knowledge which will take no refusal and which leads to great general intelligence. In political discussion, acrimony and hate are not essential, and have of late years quite perceptibly diminished and will more and more diminish when discussions by women, and in the presence of women, become more common. If, then, discussion of public affairs among

men has elevated them in knowledge and intelligence, why will it not lead to the same results among women? It is not merely education that makes civilization, but diffusion of education. The standing of a nation and its future depend not upon the education of the few, but of the whole. Every improvement in the status of woman in the matter of education has been an improvement to the whole race. Women have by education thus far become more womanly, not less. The same prophesies of ruin to womanliness were made against her education on general subjects that are now made against her participation in politics.

It is sometimes asserted that women now have a great influence in politics through their husbands and brothers. That is undoubtedly true. But that is just the kind of influence which is not wholesome for the community, for it is influence unaccompanied by responsibility. People are always ready to recommend to others what they would not do themselves. If it be true that women can not be prevented from exercising political influence, is not that only another reason why they should be steadied in their political action by that proper sense of responsibility which comes from acting themselves?

We conclude, then, every reason which in this country bestows the ballot upon man is equally applicable to the proposition to bestow the ballot upon woman, that in our judgment there is no foundation for the fear that woman will thereby become unfitted for all the duties she has hitherto performed.

T. B. Reed.
E. B. Taylor.
M. A. McCoid.
T. M. Browne.

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